

## *Chapter 1*

Breaking his promise, the farmer resumed beating poor young Andres when the familiar sound of the track moving along the rollers erupted. Matt set his grungy copy of *Don Quixote* aside to continue his job. He looked down the dull grey soot covered walls of the welding plant and took one last sniff of metallic dust before he dropped the visor on his white cap. The white cap looked like a space helmet complete with a hose that pumped in fresh air to the grinder operators as they went to work. In some sense, the welding plant was a wonder of modern technology complete with safety features like the white caps, lock out buttons, and a welding machine the size of a Volkswagen van that grabbed two pieces of rail, slammed them together, and super heated them to the point that metal fused together. In another sense, the plant was something out of the early industrial revolution. Dingy soot covered walls, grimy faced welders and grinders, and railroad workers walking to and fro in a ballet that combined work productivity with the ever present danger of stepping in the wrong place at the wrong time and having a ton of steel smash through your midsection.

Matt stood up and grabbed the pneumatic angle grinder as the weld was pushed forward to his finish grinding station. He braced it against his hip, and slammed it into the slag that surrounded his weld. First he knocked off the tip of the flange, then he moved to the side of the rail ball. He ground this until nice and smooth and then in one fluid motion he tossed the grinder in the air, wheel still spinning, and switched his hands, right to left, from trigger hand to the side handle. He re-fired the trigger and followed the slag again from the flange up to the top of the ball. After the process was complete, he killed the wheel and set it on his work bench. Matt sat back down, flipped up the visor on his white cap and continued reading *Don Quixote*.

It took forty five seconds for the average finish grinder to do his job, thirty seconds if he

was good. The welding machine took about two and a half minutes and then another twenty seconds for the pushing machine to move the rail from one station to the next. There was an assembly line of tradesmen. First, the polisher who buffed the ends of the rail so the welding machine could make a better connection. Then, the welder: he lined up the two pieces of rail in the machine and fused the rail. Next were the grinders, one on each side, to polish up the slag. Then came the press operator who straightened the rail. Finally, an inspector checked the work for blemishes. Then the rail went out into the yard where the railroaders loaded it onto the trains.

A decidedly blue collar job and yet those that worked it were often as well read as most academics. Each position required about a minute's worth of work giving the workers two minutes to either get really bored or read a book. Now, that isn't to say that *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were not on the list for required reading, but even if you had a subscription to both, that would last about two shifts. Matt had never actually read an article in a *Playboy* before starting this job. So once that month's smut mags were read, and passed up and down the plant, the workers looked to other sources to keep themselves entertained during the down time. Lunchtime conversation could just as easily shift from which magazine had the best centerfold to whether Mary Shelley had written the first true horror novel or the first true science fiction. The nature of the job had transformed the largely uneducated crew of the welding plant into scholars.

For this reason, it was a good fit for Matt. With high expectations upon graduation, he entered the real world and found that his degree was meaningless. In the wake of the financial collapse, knowing somebody who knew somebody was the only reliable way to find work. The only person Matt knew was his father, a career railroader. And in his current career pursuit, he also had many opportunities to learn to work metal. While tonight he chose to read fiction, he often read about the latest in metallurgical technology, from what new alloys were being

fabricated to the tool being created to manipulate those metals.

*Don Quixote* had blithely blundered into yet another imagined heroic confrontation when the lunch bell rang. Well, it was really more like a late night snack bell: 8:00 PM, the thirty minute break that was guaranteed by OSHA. The crews shifted from night shift to day shift every two weeks. A “fairness thing,” Matt supposed. That way each crewman never had to get screwed out of their daytime or their nighttime. Matt always wished that the night shift could just skip the lunch break in lieu of getting off a half hour early.

He set his book down, peeled off his white cap, and removed his welding chaps. Ducking under the rail, he headed down the concrete corridor towards the door. Tonight was brown bag night so he headed outside to see who else would be around. It was a nice early June night so a light jacket was all that was needed. The guys took advantage of nights like this and usually ate outside. The fresh air felt great after breathing in a space helmet for four hours. Matt sat down on the grated stairwell that led inside to the plant. Wade, the welder, was there and so was Jay, the new rough grinder. Wade was a ranch kid from the valley but strangely he and Matt had formed a solid “drinking buddy” relationship. As different as their backgrounds had been, a bond formed in jobs like these between those with solid work ethics. Jay had grown up on a farm in Nebraska but he had somehow managed not to learn about hard physical labor. He had been working over a month and still complained about his forearms. Most of the guys dismissed him as a “tool”.

“Man, those grinders really tear you up! Don’t they, man?”

Wade ignored him while he chomped on his sandwich.

“Hey, Matt, how long did it take you before they stopped hurting?”

Matt wanted to tell the kid to get over it, but he answered. “oh... about a week.” He couldn’t believe Jay was still having trouble. To make it in this job long enough to move to the

next job, you had to learn to use your body. The pneumatic grinder runs a nine inch disk, spins at 2500 RPM, and vibrates the hell out of your arms. To last an eight hour shift, you needed to adjust your body to cope with the stress. You bend at the knees, brace the grinder against your hip, your belly, or just brace the damn thing anywhere as long as you deflect the jarring weight and vibrations from your arms as much as possible. It was common sense but after a month, Jay still hadn't figured it out.

“I donno’ man this is a lot rougher than construction.”

Matt and Wade exchanged glances. They had gotten to the root of his construction “jobs.” Jay showed up bragging about what a tough road construction guy he was only to ultimately reveal that he was a “safety” specialist. A flagger!

Wade couldn't stand it any longer and launched into the game they played when they couldn't think of anything else to talk about at lunch. “Demi Moore and Monica Bellucci.”

Matt raised an eyebrow, “Sexy older ladies. Good one.” He paused and thought about it, “Katy Perry and Megan Fox.”

Wade smirked, “Trite and immature. You could pull that out of a Maxim top ten. Can't you do better?”

Matt was humbled a bit. It was true his game was off. He had other things on his mind. “Okay. Scarlett Johansson and Sarah Jessica Parker.”

Wade brightened, “Shit, yeah! Thinking man's sexy.”

In truth, the game was banal. If it had a name it would be “Who would be the coolest in a lesbo scene.”

Then Jay had to pipe in as if he was part of the group. “Oh I got one! Carey Underwood and Taylor Swift!”

Matt flayed out his hands in disbelief, “That’s a fucking trump card, you idiot!” Wade started laughing and Jay slid back into his corner on the darkened stairway. Matt immediately felt bad. It was unseemly to even engage in such a conversation, let alone take it seriously, but playing along to such trivialities was part of fitting in at the welding plant.

Wade sensed Matt’s guilt and politely changed the subject. “So what do you think of the book?”

Matt thought for a second, “Man, I’m not sure. I get that he is crazy, but he takes the farmer at his word that he won’t keep beating up the boy. So I guess the guy is both crazy and naive.”

“You’re too pragmatic. I think the point is that sometimes it doesn’t matter if you *can* change the world. What matters is that you *try*. Just finish the book and it will make sense.”

The conversation paused for a moment giving Matt an opportunity to glance at his watch. It was time to make a polite exit.

“Hey, guys, I have to get something from my truck. Be back in a minute.” He set his lunch on the stairwell and walked along the gravel pathway that separated the plant from the rail yard. The parking lot was tucked behind the welding plant. There was no street light and with Wade and Jay behind the plant, and the others off to McDonald’s, it seemed quiet enough. Matt walked past his truck to a rundown Subaru parked in the corner. From the windshield, he could see the driver inside light a cigarette. With one last check for any passersby along the footbridge that crossed the length of the rail yard, Matt entered the car.

He looked at the driver. He was a stout fellow who had probably grown a gut only with the onset of middle age. His suit looked expensive but not the kind a person born to wealth would ever consider. It was a subtly gaudy suit that people who fell into wealth often bought

merely to show off. The man was clean shaven and well kept all except for the edges of a Tattoo that crept up his neck and out of the suit. That simple tag, a reminder of his prison days, was probably quite a hindrance to this man's attempt to go legitimate.

“Smithwick?”

“Yeah..you Matt?”

Matt nodded. Smithwick extended his hand and they shook. “Kinda’ cheap car for such a nice suit.”

Smithwick chuckled at himself, “Never take your own ride to a meeting.”

Matt paused looking back at the plant. “Good point. Maybe I shouldn't make a meeting on my lunch break.”

“Ah, hell if you played it right, this is the best place for it.” Matt looked puzzled, “Alibi.”

“Ahh,” Matt said nodding. “So?”

“Need a Box man.”

“Okay,” Matt said in a tone that indicated he would listen.

“It's kind of a screwy job. Speculative. You see, instead of guys like you getting bids on your merchandise from guys like me, this time you're the contractor. I farm this project out to a few guys I know and see who gives me the best offer.”

Matt wasn't sure he liked the sound of that, “Why does it have to go down like that?”

Smithwick sympathetically nodded his head, “Believe me, it is not like I'm trying to screw the crew on this one. The deal is that the product that is desired doesn't exactly have a dollar value. A small group of people want it, another small group of people want to keep it. Other than that I'm not sure anyone gives a shit. So, as they say, there is no street value.”

“Okay,” Matt continued still a little confused. “What is it?”

Smithwick sighed, "You won't know that unless you get the bid. The way this works is, I pass you this envelope. Inside are specific dimensions on the box as well as the basics of the location and triggers you'll need to negotiate. We are looking for a wire right now and hopefully he'll be good enough to jump the whole system. When we get the team, then the product will be disclosed as well as more specific parameters. You have a week to mull it over but I'd like you to open the envelope right now so you can give me your first impression."

Matt did as he was told and began examining the schematics within. "American Independence Safe Company ...Huh... Metal on this would take a while to drill. Water nearby?"

"Well, flooding it could be bad. The product won't react well to water or heat."

"So a burning bar is out as well."

"That would be the case, brother. What do you think about manipulation?" Smithwick inquired.

"Hah!" Matt laughed as he leaned back in the seat and stared out to the dimly lit footbridge.

Smithwick held his hands up as if to empathize, "Look, I know it isn't used that often but if this could go clean it might look like an inside job. If that happens, the cops will get so fucked up following a false lead that all involved will be long gone before anyone knows what hit them. Hell, kid, that's why I thought of you. Every grocery bank you ever hit, you picked the locks to get into. You have some dexterity. You ought to use it. It's more classy anyway."

Matt looked back at the paperwork and flipped through a few pages. "Look here, even if I could figure a way to manipulate this one, look at your own intel," he said pointing to the specs on the page.

Smithwick looked at the page confused, “Look, kid, you need to explain it to me. I haven’t done inside work since they sent me up.”

“Okay,” Matt said patiently. “It says on your intel that the door locks are Medico’s; specifically the Biaxial Cylinders. You see, Medico’s have not just six pins in the keyhole that need to be picked, each pin has an angle beveled in it that corresponds to an angle on the key. Each pin has to be picked and, while being picked, it has to be twisted at a perfect angle. Now, it can be manipulated but it still needs to be drilled. The side bar that corresponds to those pins needs to be drilled and pulled out of the way before you can pick it. No matter what you do, there will be evidence. You might as well blow the fucking safe if you have to drill the fucking locks.” Matt paused a moment. He would love the opportunity but he was afraid it might be a bit over his head, especially if the job needed to be done clean.

Smithwick understood Matt’s dilemma. “Okay, look, making this a clean job is negotiable. The deal is that they will pay more for a yegg like Jimmy Valentine than a Butch Cassidy.” For someone who knew his profession like Matt, the reference was clear. Jimmy Valentine was a famous safe cracker who could open a vault with only his fingers. Butch Cassidy was famous for blowing safes up. “Look it over this week. If you can come up with a solid plan, let me know. If it requires a lot of broken down doors and explosions, but still works, maybe think fifty. However, if you can leave no trace, you could push that figure to 100. In a week I’ll be collecting all the plans and all the bids. I’ll pitch it to the employers and we’ll get back to you. Hey, but think about this kid. One way or another it will be a better take than knocking off the box in the local grocery store.”

Matt nodded in agreement, “I’ll give it a try. You’ll have it in a week.”

The two shook hands and Matt headed off to work.